

THE EXTRAORDINARY TALE OF THE WHITE PROMINENT 1  
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PROMINENT: *LEUCODONTA BICOLORIA*  
D. & S. IN COUNTY KERRY

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The White Prominent is an extremely rare entomological prize which has only been taken at Burnt Wood, Staffordshire some 120 years ago (Chappell, 1865; Sidebotham, 1874); near Exeter, Devon, where one is said to have been captured in 1880 (Barrett, 1896); and, in Co. Kerry in the Irish Republic, where the majority have occurred. However, its discovery in Kerry and its subsequent history there is so interesting and curious, that I have considered it worthwhile to produce as full an account as possible, in an attempt to relate the complete story from the numerous references scattered about the natural history journals.

Although Barrett (1896), Baynes (1964), Donovan (1936) and Kane (1901) all give the year of its discovery as 1859, the true date should be 1858 as the following testifies: "Mr. Peter Bouchard, of Sutton, Surrey, a collector of insects of great ability, went in the summer of 1858, to Ireland to collect moths and beetles. He was engaged on the 1st July 1858 hunting for his prey on Colonel Herbert's estate, about 5 miles from the town of Killarney, not far from the far-famed Muckross Abbey. When beating the birch, a curious white moth, entirely new to him, fell to the ground. This he picked up and in a state of delight that can only be guessed by one who is not a collector, Mr. Bouchard killed it and set it out . . . [here follows a description of the moth] . . . Mr. Bouchard worked the locality for more than a week, but without further success. On writing to London, he found that the species was *Notodonta bicolor*". "Continental specimens of it exist in the British Museum; but up to this it had been unrepresented in the British collection. Mr. Bouchard parted with his specimen to Mr. Waring of London" (White, 1858).

The above capture was also recorded as follows: "A specimen of this conspicuous and pretty species was taken near Killarney, last July, by Mr. Bouchard in an extensive birchwood. The specimen is in Mr. Waring's collection" (Stainton, 1859). A further note had also appeared some months before, recording Bouchard's capture and informing readers that the specimen had been exhibited at a meeting of the Entomological Society of London (Stainton, 1858).

The next reported capture was in 1859, again by the fortunate Bouchard and reads: "Another specimen of this insect was taken near Killarney, by Mr. Bouchard at the end of June" (Stainton, 1860). This specimen was apparently seen by Edwin Birchall, who wrote in his diary: ". . . On our way back called at the Tower, to

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see P. Bouchard: he showed us a splendid male specimen of *Noto-donta bicolora*, captured the previous week. . ." (Birchall, 1859).

That same year, a certain Dr. A. Wallace M.B. in describing his experiences in Ireland observed: "At Killarney I heard from the carmen that a gentleman and his wife had been there with insect nets and had offered £2.2s. to anyone who would bring them the 'white moth'. From the way in which the carmen spoke they evidently believed the whole thing to be the jest of an insane person, and were much astonished when I asserted the truth of the value of the insect. How many white butterflies were brought to them, I did not hear . . ." (Wallace, 1859).

Reports of the occurrence of the White Prominent in Kerry after 1859 seem to differ slightly. Kane (1901) mentions another specimen in 1860 found in a spider's web; whilst Barrett (1896) informs us: "Several more were taken by Bouchard in the same place — Mr. S. Stevens believes seven or eight — and the wings of one found at the foot of a tree".

Some years later the following brief Note appeared: "It is reported that Mr. Bouchard has again taken this rarity [*L. bicoloria*] in the Killarney district" (Anon., 1864); which report was corroborated it seems by Dr. H. G. Knaggs in his "Table of Local and Scarce British Lepidoptera captured in 1864" (Knaggs, 1865).

In 1867, the existence of *L. bicoloria* was at last confirmed by someone other than Bouchard. A Mr. J. Ray Hardy of Manchester captured a male specimen, and in the following year beat a larva from which he bred a female that emerged in 1869. Both the moth and the caterpillar were found about a mile from the Mucross Hotel (Hardy, 1874).

Although the evidence up until then of the presence of *L. bicoloria* at Killarney would surely seem to have been satisfactorily proved from the published records; yet, as several years went by, and no other collector was fortunate enough to turn up a fresh specimen, doubts began to be cast on the validity of Bouchard's supposed captures. Bouchard was now dead, having succumbed in 1865 from a bout of fever contracted during a trip to the West Indies. However, Birchall (1867a) wrote defending Bouchard's integrity in the following words: "Doubt has been cast upon the native origin of the specimens said to have been captured at Killarney by the late Peter Bouchard. I can only say I saw two specimens in his hands there, which had certainly been alive within a few hours, and I do not know any ground to suspect a deliberately planned fraud; still the fact that the most determined search, year after year, by some of our best collectors, failed to produce further examples was a discouraging circumstance, and, considering the temptation which the capture of so fine an addition to our native insects offered to a man in Bouchard's circumstances, perhaps justified the scept-

ticism which has existed. I have, however, the pleasure of stating that Mr. John Hardy, Jnr. of Manchester, has this season (1866) captured a male specimen of *N. bicolor* near the spot which Bouchard pointed out to me as that in which he took the insect; and there is therefore no reason why we should refuse to include the species in our lists".

Later, Birchall (1867b) contributed an article in which he listed some of the species known to occur at Killarney, and then went on to say: "The most interesting of the above named insects *Notodonta bicolor*, I have never been fortunate enough to capture, though I have made several journeys to Killarney with that object. A man is apt to suffer in fame if he finds a species that cannot be discovered again, and something of this sort was poor Bouchard's fate in connection with his discovery of *bicolor* at Killarney. The capture of specimens of the insect, both in the larva and imago state, during the summer of 1866, I am glad to say removes any ground of doubt as to its truly indigenous character; all the specimens yet taken have been beaten from birch trees on Muckross peninsular early in June . . .<sup>1</sup>

The following extract from an account by Samuel Stevens on entomology in Ireland reads: "In marshy places . . . I was very pleased to meet with parties who saw *alive* several specimens of *N. bicolora* (or *Micholora* as they call it), there taken by the late Peter Bouchard; and I was pointed out a birch tree, where he had found a specimen at rest on the trunk. I was too early myself for this insect; but I spent a day in the plantations where they were taken, and found it very hard work, not being at the time very well. I don't see any reason why this insect should not occur again there, if any good collector could spend a few weeks on the spot, and is not afraid of hard work and getting wet feet in the swampy, boggy places where it occurs". (Stevens, 1871).

Six years after defending Bouchard's integrity, Birchall (1873) manifested a remarkable *volte-face* by listing in the *Entomologist's Monthly Magazine* some 16 species that he considered ought to be deleted from the Irish list, among them *L. bicoloria*. His article caused quite a stir, being followed up in the same journal by several letters hotly defending Bouchard's reputation and utterly refuting Birchall's doubts on the authenticity of *L. bicoloria* as an Irish species. However, Birchall nothing daunted, refused to be shaken in his attitude and in his last letter (Birchall, 1874), openly stated that he himself believed the *L. bicoloria* specimens were of foreign origin. Finally, the Editor felt obliged to close all further communications on the subject.

No more news of the White Prominent was forthcoming for

<sup>1</sup>It should be mentioned that there is a discrepancy of dates here, as Hardy gave the year of this first capture as 1867, as stated earlier.

some years, until W. F. de Vismes Kane read a long paper to the Royal Irish Academy. In this, he gives a most interesting account of his investigations at Killarney in 1885, regarding the occurrence there of *Minucia lunaris* D. & S. and *L. bicoloria*. He had made enquiries at Tower Lodge (then owned by Col. Herbert) on the Upper Lake, where Bouchard had stayed with a family, the husband being a deerkeeper and now an old man. From him, Kane received a corroborative story of the discovery in 1858 of Bouchard's original specimen of *L. bicoloria*. Kane also states in the same account that a "report, moreover is current, that on a post in the 'West-meadows' of Mucross demesne another specimen was found a few years since by a labourer, who sold it for 10/- to a naturalist then staying at an hotel in Killarney. Of this I was told a notice appeared in some Natural History Journal, which I have not been able to trace . . . " (Kane, 1886).

Nothing more was heard of the elusive White Prominent until 1892, in which year Miss Vernon of Clontarf showed Kane her collection of insects, amongst which were "two rather poor specimens of *Notodonta bicolor* from a new locality in Kerry" (Kane, 1901). Donovan (1936) elucidated that the locality referred to, was Ardultully near Kenmare.

On the occasion of the sale on 22nd October 1907 of the Rev. G. H. Raynor's British Lepidoptera, a specimen of *L. bicoloria* (originally taken by Bouchard at Killarney) induced bidding up to £4.10s. (Anon., 1907). This must have been a princely sum of money in those Edwardian days.

The next collector to take this rare moth was the Rev. Canon G. Foster, who describes how in 1912, he sheltered beneath a hazel tree in the neighbourhood of the Glencar Woods during a thunderstorm and was lucky enough to beat out an imago of *L. bicoloria*, when the storm was over. The day after, a second specimen was found on a window ledge by some friends with whom he was staying (Foster, 1932).

Five years later, in June 1917, an energetic collector named L. H. Bonaparte Wyse was cycling along the Kenmare road between Muckcross and Dennycunihy, when he noticed a white moth settle on a holly leaf. This he caught, put it in a pillbox and found it to be a male *L. bicoloria* in good condition (Wyse, 1917).

A further 15 years then elapsed before any more news of the Prominent became known. In 1932, Col. C. Donovan was fortunate enough to beat three larvae in a wood fairly near Kenmare (Donovan, 1932). A year later, in 1933, Donovan collected no less than 18 larvae somewhere near Killarney in the region of the Middle Lake. This extraordinarily lucky lepidopterist apparently had no trouble in breeding the caterpillars through to maturity and the adults emerged safely in due course (Donovan, 1936). The same author

also mentions a single larva taken at Killarney in 1936 by a sister of his, Mrs. G. E. Lucas (Donovan, 1936: Supplement, p.2). The late H. C. Huggins informed me that his collection (Huggins' collection is now in the BMNH) contained one of the above-mentioned Donovan-bred *L. bicoloria*; and Chalmer-Hunt (1982) states there are four *L. bicoloria* in the National Museum of Ireland, gives the details of these and a natural size photograph of one of them, a Killarney specimen bred by Donovan on 24th April 1934.

The last *L. bicoloria* to have occurred, so far as is known, was taken by Mrs. G. E. Lucas who found a perfect male "settled on a mossy bank under trees" in the Killarney district, on 12th May 1938, an unusually early date for this species (Lucas, 1938).

Several collectors have since tried unsuccessfully with modern m.v. lamps to trap the much sought after White Prominent (Huggins, 1960). It seems strange that nothing has been heard of the moth now for over 40 years; but judging from its past history we may confidently predict that *L. bicoloria* will again turn up at long last.

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EUMICHTIS LICHENEA HBN. (FEATHERED RANUNCULUS): THANET CRESS AS A MAJOR LARVAL FOODPLANT. — Although it is well known by many lepidopterists in the South East, that to obtain *E. lichenea* one journeys to the Sussex coast near Rye on a night in May to find the larvae in plenty among the conspicuous flowering clumps of *Cardaria draba* (Cruciferae), I believe this plant has not been noted previously in print as a foodplant of *lichenea*. I made such a visit in 1973, larvae were found, sand was obtained for the caterpillars to hide and pupate in, and in September moths of a relatively dark form emerged. This alien plant from S. and C. Europe and western Asia is now well established in many places along the south coast; has it become the foodplant of other colonies of *lichenea*? — B. K. WEST, 36 Briar Road, Bexley, Kent.

THE PEACOCK AND THE TUBE. — The summer of 1983 seems to have been exceptionally good for the Peacock Butterfly (*Inachis io*) in the London area. Buddleia plants in Highgate were smothered with specimens in late July and August. I do think it worthwhile, however, to record the circumstances of one unusual observation. Arriving at Leicester Square Tube Station after a weekend in Paris on August 22nd a perfect male *io* was fluttering about with some determination on the northern platform of the Northern Line. The time was 22.00, but it was obviously looking for suitable hibernation sites. It seems most unlikely that it could have made its way into the underground system of the Tube network so it must have been blown for miles by passing trains from one of the places where the Tube transitions from under- to overground. — TORBEN B. LARSEN, 23 Jacksons Lane, London, N6.